

NITHPO

Narragansett Indian Tribal Historic Preservation Office

4425 A South County Trail
Charlestown, RI 02813



5 January 2016

Town of Montague
Walter Ramsey, Planner
Planning & Conservation Department
One Avenue A
Turners Falls, MA 01376

RE: Battle of Great Falls/Phase II Support

Greetings, Mr. Ramsey:

The Narragansett Indian Tribal Historic Preservation Office is charged with addressing matters of historic preservation on behalf of the federally recognized Narragansett Tribe. We are aware that ancestral Narragansetts were frequent visitors to the annual ceremonies held by the Pocumtuc People of the Falls area. On May 19, 2004, the Elder Medicine Man of the Narragansett performed a "Bury the Hatchet" ceremony of reconciliation with the members of the Town Select Board and the Town Administrator. Reconciliation and healing are processes that require tending. I am honored to say how pleased I am with the efforts put forth by the Town of Montague in nurturing Phase One of this project and the public support and healing it is promoting.

The metal detection analysis of designated areas was a powerful and successful tool in the study of events of the same time period on the Nipsachuck Battlefield Project in North Smithfield, RI. NITHPO looks forward to being a full participant in the planning, field assessment and analysis of this and other aspects of the Phase II work. You have our support.

Doug Harris, Preservationist for Ceremonial Landscapes
& Deputy Tribal Historic Preservation Officer

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Narragansett Oral History **BURYING THE HATCHET/TOMAHAWK**

I have had to alter my contracted commitment to restate the details within Narragansett oral history relating to the tragic events of the massacre of Tribal refugees gathered near the falls at Peskeompskutt, at the bend in the Pocumtuc region of the great river, below the upper village of Wissatinnewag and its terraces.

As the detailing was begun, it was clear that, personally, I was embarking on a process that was counter to the May 19, 2004 commitment made by Elder Narragansett Medicine Man Running Wolf in his "burying the hatchet/tomahawk" ceremony and the smoking of the pipe of peace with the Montague Select Board and Town Administrator at Unity Park. I was a participant in that ceremony and I hold it sacred. As a participant in that ceremony, it is my perception that my retelling the tragic Tribal events of May 19, 1676 would be, not parallel to, but a sacrilege at cross purposes to the releasing of those spirits who were stuck here and out of balance in their greatest moment of torment. Of that sacrilege, I shall not be guilty.

TRADITION OF NARRAGANSETT SAFETY: Narragansett oral history informs us that from the era when the raiding Mohawk were in conflict with the coastal Tribes regarding lands with longer corn growing seasons and wampum rich shell fish beds, Narragansett had served as a refuge for the women, children and elderly of the Narragansett regional neighbors during times of threat. By the ancient system of clans regional Tribes were all inter-related. As regional Tribal defenders began to heed the call of Metacom/King Philip announcing that conflict with the invading colonists was approaching, Narragansett, by long standing tradition opened its territory to the families of regional defenders. When challenged by the governor of Plymouth to release his Wampanoag who were in Narragansett safety, Chief Sachem Canonchet's response, "Not one Wampanoag, nor the paring of a Wampanoag's nail shall I release to you." was not seen as the protection of relatives, but considered a war challenge.

The combined colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Plymouth raised a thousand man militia for a surprise assault on December 19, 1675 that has been historically assessed to be a shooting and burning massacre of more than half the multi-Tribal families in refuge at the Great Swamp island fort. The island fort was surrounded by an un-crossable frozen swamp. The swamp fort did have one secret access. Prior to the assault, this access was revealed by a captured Narragansett. Oral history cites that the bulk of the Narragansett defenders were encamped at a military compound nearly two hours away by foot from the presumed safety of the secluded, frozen swamp surrounded refugee fort.

ARRIVAL AT PESKEOMPSKUTT: Arriving from Narragansett Countrye was Narragansett Chief Sachem Canonchet, his brother Sachem Pessacus, cousins Sachem Pumham, Sachem Quanopen/Quinnapi and Quanopen's new wife Weetamoo, the Pocasset Tribe's woman Sachem (Suank Squaw). In the wake of the anguish and horrific losses at the Great Swamp, these leaders and their fellow refugees carried the assaults of war to Colonial settlements, such as Mary Rowlandson's town of Lancaster, as they made their way to the remote safety of the Pocumtuc in the northwest. Pocumtuc territory was considered well supplied year round, remote, ceremonial and safe.

Joining the Norwottuck and other recently arrived refugees, the mixed Tribal remnants that escaped the Narragansett Great Swamp settled into the wooded shores along the falls and the great bend in the river and its islands. Just above the falls and bend at the Peskeompskutt/Wissatinnewag area was the secluded village of Squakheag (Northfield). There, these leaders met in council with Metacom and chiefs of the Pocumtuc, Nipmuc, Pennacook, Nashawags, Quabaug, the Tarrantines of the far northeast and other regional chiefs to shape a plan to either intensify the war or respond to overtures of peace offered by Colonial representatives in Hartford. Reputed to be a skilled Indian warfare tactician, we are told that the two imperatives for Canonchet coming out of this chief's council was stabilizing the wellbeing and security of the refugees along the river and making a return journey to acquire seed corn from eastern coastal caches. The expanded population of refugees were exhausting the limited supply of seed corn that would soon be needed for the Spring planting, if there was to be a Fall harvest of corn.

CANONCHET DEPARTS: Back past the recently burned colonial villages, Canonchet led a party to acquire the corn stored back east. With the assistance of younger relatives, corn was returned to Pocumtuc territory for planting. Along the Blackstone River he was captured following attacks on Providence and Rehoboth. When informed that he would be put to death since he would not agree to convince his people to stop fighting, we are told his response was, "I like it well. I shall die before by heart is soft, and before I have spoken a word unworthy of myself."

We are informed that the distracting uncertainties of a heavy rain storm made the Turner militia's breaching of the security of the refugee encampments easier than it should have been and many lives were lost. Without further apology, I offer no oral historic details. Attack was an ever present concern. The long expected assault was feared to come from the Mohawk, the Narragansett spoke Mohawk. The assault was Colonial, not Mohawk. King Philip's War was the first North American indigenous peoples war to resist English colonization. It was America's first major regional conflict -- death and historic trauma were its only true victors. Many Colonial and Indigenous descendants still carry the trauma of that era of historic nightmare. Burying the hatchet is a process, not a moment.

Tau botdan tamock wutche wame (We are giving thanks for all things -- those things we ask for and those that were unbidden, yet were just what we needed to bring about balance and harmony.)



1-5-2016

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